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POLITICIANS STILL STRUGGLE WITH BORDER'S REVITALIZATION

BY MANDY JACKSON

Ten years ago, Rep. Bob Filner faced a number of border issues as a freshman representative in Congress.

A decade later, Filner has seen the election of a new president, governor and mayor of San Diego. And while the issues at the border may have shifted, the Chula Vista Democrat still senses the apathy among those in power today that was prevalent 10 years ago.

The events of Sept. 11 made border security a priority, and Filner pushed for emergency funding to boost the number of border inspectors. They are needed to soften the economic hardship suffered by many border-area businesses in the wake of tightened security. It appears, however, help isn't likely to come soon.

Filner said the federal governments of the United States and Mexico have yet to develop an agenda to help communities along the border cope with the impacts of Sept. 11 and other long-term issues.

Some members of Congress, such as California Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein - both from northern California - are sympathetic to the border region's problems, Filner said.

Yet, he added, "If you don't live in this area it's hard to understand it."

"There was a lot of attention early on to the Canadian border," said Sidney Weintraub, a senior scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, an independent, non-partisan public policy research organization based in Washington, D.C.

Weintraub's impression is that traffic at the U.S.-Mexico border is not a terribly important issue in Washington.

"I'm afraid it's very low priority. The people who would have to press the issue are the members of Congress," he said.

Show Of Support

Alejandra Mier y Teran, executive director of the Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce, is encouraged by the chamber's interaction with many of San Diego's elected officials.

Filner, San Diego City Councilman Ralph Inzunza, county supervisors Ron Roberts and Greg Cox and two Chula Vista City Council members were among the 230 attendees of the Otay Mesa chamber's anniversary dinner earlier this month.

Tijuana's mayor and the U.S. Consul General attended, as did representatives for state Assemblyman Juan Vargas, D-Chula Vista.

"It's a sign that we work with all these people and they're there for us. For a chamber that's not that big (its roster numbers 380 members), it shows how we work with our elected officials," Mier y Teran said.

Filner, however, was quick to point out he needs support from San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy and California Gov. Gray Davis to emphasize local needs in Washington, D.C. He was frustrated that Murphy did not mention the border in last month's State of the City address.

"The mayor sends a signal that he's not interested," he said.

Rudy Fernandez, Murphy's staff member overseeing border issues and binational affairs, said, "Everything is very important at the border. One of the most important issues now is to get the traffic back."

Murphy is concerned about environmental issues, infrastructure and economic development, among other things, Fernandez said.

An international air cargo terminal, water treatment facilities and new border crossings are all issues Murphy wants to address.

"We're taking a look at all these things, but we need to collect all the data before we can address them," he added.

Mier y Teran said Murphy hasn't spent much time in Otay Mesa. Filner was more blunt.

"The mayor of San Diego has the status and the power to be involved in discussions with the mayors and governors and president in Mexico," he said.

Fernandez said Murphy's office has been waiting for Baja California's new government officials to take office. Tijuana Mayor Jesus Gonzalez took office in December, while Baja Gov. Eugenio Elorduy Walther was elected earlier in 2001.

Gonzalez and three Mexican governors attended a reception in San Diego hosted by the city in January, Fernandez pointed out. Last April, Murphy went to Tijuana to sign a binational coordination agreement, in which government agencies on both sides cooperate on issues such as planning, land use and police training.

Consensus On Various Levels Border issues are difficult because they involve the federal government, Fernandez said. Officials in San Diego have to identify the problems and recommend solutions to federal officials, he said.

Steve Gross, president of the Border Trade Alliance, a nonprofit organization that advocates trade and cross-border issues, said the county's congressional representatives don't appear to be united on border issues.

"Maybe we've been lacking in our educating them on the importance of the border for our region and California," said Gross, the president of Border Trade Services, an Otay Mesa cross-border warehousing and logistics company. Maquiladoras, he said, attract suppliers to San Diego who want to be close to the plants in Tijuana, bringing new jobs to the region.

"Our Congress members have not been as outspoken as others on the border," Gross said.

Filner lobbied President George W. Bush to declare an economic state of emergency at the border after Sept. 11, asking him to provide emergency funding for more inspectors at the border. The president has not responded to the request.

Finding Solutions

Late last year, the San Diego City Council declared an economic state of emergency at the border. The declaration was intended to send a message to Congress that assistance is needed here, though declaration did not provide financial aid for border businesses.

Also late last year, a bill boosting Immigration and Naturalization Service border inspectors authored by Filner was approved in the House. The bill, HR 3525, provides 1,000 new INS border inspectors over five years.

However, the INS can station the new inspectors at whichever border crossings it selects, including Canadian border stations. The Senate still must vote on the bill.

Gross acknowledged Filner has pushed for more funding for the INS to provide additional inspectors. However, he said, other things are needed besides border inspectors, such as investment in technology to speed up crossings.

Most of San Diego's congressional delegation voted late last year for fast track, otherwise known as the trade promotion authority, which allows the president to negotiate trade agreements with other countries without amendments from Congress. Such votes Gross noted, are too few and far between.

"Our Congress members don't vote that way on a consistent basis," Gross said.

The Otay Mesa chamber frequently communicates with Inzunza and his staff, Mier y Teran said, especially now that development is reaching into eastern Otay Mesa. Inzunza and county supervisor Cox, as well as Filner and Rep. Susan Davis, D-San Diego, support the extension of Highway 905, which is scheduled to begin construction this year.

State Assemblyman Vargas, a former city councilman, is also pushing transportation issues in Otay Mesa.

Mier y Teran expects that many local elected officials will continue to address the needs of Otay Mesa and other border communities. She said little steps toward solutions always help, but more are needed.